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# A 3-Step Process for Improving the Achievement of Struggling Students

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article with direct implications for K-12 classrooms, David Glenn reports on work at City University of New York (CUNY) to help struggling college students monitor the way they learn and improve their performance. The granddaddy of “self-regulated learning”, as it’s called, is Barry Zimmerman, a CUNY psychology professor who had two insights about what often goes wrong when students try to learn new facts and skills:

* They tend to be overconfident, assuming they understand material just because they heard it explained in class or read a textbook passage.
* When they do poorly on tests, they tend to blame outside forces (*The teacher didn’t like me, The textbook was badly written*) rather than critically examining how they studied.

Researchers have found that standard academic counseling isn’t very effective in getting students to change the way they learn. “At a certain point I realized that tutoring and counseling are not enough,” says CUNY administrator Marcela Armoza. “I thought that we needed to be more intrusive, and I thought that we needed to build specific skills.”

Charlotte Skinner of Raymond Walters College agrees. “If you just talk about study habits, students resist that, naturally… And over time, we’ve realized that these methods have a much greater effect if they’re embedded within the course content. What’s emerged is a three-pronged strategy in the classroom:

* Ask students to record how confident they are about their answers on a 5-4-3-2-1 scale before and after classroom quizzes.
* Give students fast, accurate feedback on how they’re doing – quizzes almost every day, immediately scored and returned.
* Have students process the feedback on the spot, including whether they were overconfident about what they’d learned. Students are required to rework at least two of their incorrect questions, write a sentence or two about an effective strategy, and demonstrate that they can solve a similar problem.

A randomized study showed significantly better performance by students using self-regulated learning, and anecdotal evidence from several universities shows similar gains. Students find the regimen annoying at first, but when they see the results it produces, almost all of them embrace it.

Sara Crosby, a composition instructor at City Tech in New York City, has become a big fan of self-regulated learning. “Once we focus on noticing and correcting errors in whatever writing strategy we’re working on,” she says, “the students just become junkies for feedback. They’ve found a language for talking about these things. When we talk about body paragraphs, instead of saying something vague like, ‘It’s not long enough,’ they’ll learn to say, ‘There wasn’t enough evidence,’ or ‘That anecdote didn’t work.’ And that’s sort of thrilling.”

Zimmerman says it’s essential to help all students, not just those having difficulty, be more conscious and critical of the way they learn. “Errors are part of the process of learning,” he says, “and not a sign of personal imperfection. We’re trying to help instructors and students see errors not as an endpoint, but as a beginning point for understanding what they know and what they don’t know, and how they can approach problems in a more effective way.”

“How Students Can Improve by Studying Themselves” by David Glenn in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 12, 2010 (Vol. LVI, #22, p. A1, A10, A12), no e-link available

Coaching Notes

Although this article was written for college students the strategies identified can be adapted for the high school student.

1. When completing a quiz or test, have the student rate their understanding using a 3-2-1 scale:
   1. 3: I was very confident in my answer,
   2. 2: I was somewhat confident but wasn’t 100% sure,
   3. 1: I really had no clue.
   4. Students can also use smiley/frown faces to indicate the same information
      1. ☺Smile = 3
      2. 😐Confused = 2
      3. ☹Frown = 1
2. Conduct formative assessments daily (if possible) with next day feedback.
   1. Think of using the independent activity or exit strategies built into the Instructional Framework to accomplish this task
3. Process the feedback during class.
   1. Revise incorrect answers
   2. Reflect on what worked through a Type 1 writing
   3. Answer a similar question that was correct to show true mastery